

The Texas Legislature Can Make A Difference for the Texas Universities in the Big 12 – I Know, We Did it in 1989 □

A column by Congressman Chet Edwards

When it comes to standing up for Baylor and its future, the Texas Legislature can make a difference—I know, because in 1989, when I was a Texas State Senator, that is exactly what we did. Now, it's time for our legislative leaders in Austin to do it again, and that is why I have urged Lt. Governor David Dewhurst and Speaker Joe Straus to call immediate hearings in Austin on the ongoing changes in the Big 12 Conference.

In 1989 I attended a Baylor football luncheon where then Coach Grant Teaff said that the Southwest Conference was within days of breaking up. Board Members at UT and A&M had said publicly that their universities were leaving the Southwest Conference, which would have left Baylor in the cold without a conference.

As the State Senator representing Baylor, I announced just days later that the Texas Senate State Affairs would hold a hearing on the impact of breaking up the Southwest Conference. Several key legislators publicly reminded the state's public university boards that they had a responsibility to all the taxpayers of Texas, who supported their institutions with millions of tax

dollars annually.

Within a week of the hearing, the Chancellors of the University of Texas and Texas A&M called me to say they had decided to stay in the Southwest Conference until a long-term plan could be implemented that was good for the state of Texas. The end result 5 years later, with the leadership of Governor Ann Richards and Lt. Governor Bob Bullock, was that the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University and Baylor University stayed together and joined the Big 12 Conference, a decision that served well all four universities, their respective communities and our state.

Today, with all the turmoil surrounding the future of the Big 12 Conference, the fact is the Texas Legislature is still the best forum for a full airing of this important issue. It is important that all the citizens of Texas have a right to have their voices heard on the future of the Big 12 before, not after, all the decisions have been made. These decisions are too important to be decided solely by a small handful of people behind closed doors without public input from the citizens of our great state.

The Texas Legislature has a responsibility to our taxpayers to review the impact of any conference realignment on our state's economy and historic relationships between our state's universities and their respective communities.

It is not the fault of Texas, Texas A&M, Baylor or Texas Tech that Colorado and

possibly Nebraska are leaving the Big 12. The departure of Nebraska alone would have a significant, negative impact on the Big 12, and the respective schools' boards have a right to seriously consider their options. However, my belief is that this is such an important issue to the entire state of Texas that long-term decisions about the future of our state's universities and their respective cities should be made in public, with input from citizens and legislators alike.

It is my hope that the historic ties and traditions of the partnership between University of Texas, Texas A&M University, Baylor University and Texas Tech University can be continued, and I would urge Board Members at the Texas and A&M to consider doing so.

Whatever decisions are made should be made in public with public input because this issue is bigger than conferences or television contracts -- this is about Texas protecting its future. I would salute Lt. Gov. Dewhurst and Speaker Straus for exercising leadership on this important issue and allowing the people of Texas to have their voices heard.

Congressman Edwards is a 1974 graduate of Texas A&M University who represents both Baylor and Texas A&M in the 17th congressional district.